



## The Housing Question

In the period following the 1867 publication of *Capital*, Volume 1, the rise and fall of the Paris Commune in 1871, and the relative lapse of the formal International Working Men's Association (the "First International") in 1872, Karl Marx and Frederick Engels continued to be active and prominent leaders.

The international working-class movement continued to correspond and to meet. There was a [Congress in Ghent](#), Belgium in 1877, and what is regarded as the [Founding Congress of the Second International](#) took place in Chur, Switzerland in 1881 (This was still within the lifetime of Karl Marx, who died at age 65 in 1883). Between these two meetings the main body of anarchists dropped out of formal liaison with the organised communists, never to return.

Within all this there is a continuity of solidarity. Anti-communist bourgeois historians (e.g. the authors of the [Wikipedia entry on the Second International](#)) are inclined to depict a collapse and a vacuum in this period, followed by a sudden re-founding of the “socialist international” in 1889, in Paris. The fullest record of the [founding of the Second International](#) is, as usual, on the Marxists Internet Archive. It shows continuity, and not a vacuum.

Some of the struggles in the International were repetitions of even earlier ones. This is well illustrated by Engels’ book called [“The Housing Question”](#) (attached; downloadable extract linked below). As we have noted, the first published “classic” of Marxism (at least according to Lenin’s judgement) was [“The Poverty of Philosophy”](#), which came out in 1847 and was a polemic against the anarchist Pierre-Joseph Proudhon (1809-1865).

It does sometimes help to regard Marxism as a matter of marking out boundaries, or borders. The first demarcation is the one that separates the Bourgeoisie from the Proletariat, as was done, for example, in the [“Communist Manifesto”](#) of 1848. Although this division and the consequent prospect of class struggle is contested by some liberals, yet most bourgeois intellectuals find themselves obliged to accept it, most of the time.

This boundary is not the only one that is required for an all-round definition of Marxism. From the start, a different lot of liberals, usually called anarchists or “ultra-leftists” but still essentially liberals, challenged Marx and Engels at every point. Their names crop up even before the 1845 genesis of Marxism:

Stirner, Weitling, Proudhon. Later, Bakunin wastes time in the First International by opposing the organised proletarian communists.

Now, in 1872, a quarter of a century after the publication of “the first mature work of Marxism” (i.e. “The Poverty of Philosophy”), and with Marx’s old antagonist (Proudhon) long deceased, Engels finds it necessary to re-launch the polemic against Proudhon, in this classic work “The Housing Question”. This was because of a resurgence of “Proudhonism”.

Thanks to his own 1845 book, “[The Condition of the Working Class in England](#)”, Frederick Engels was already a pioneer of urban studies.

Hence one might approach his book “[The Housing Question](#)” (linked below) expecting answers to the housing question. One might hope for instructions about what to build. One might expect sermons about “delivery”, or even model house-plans. Instead, one finds severe polemic about very fundamental issues of class struggle.

Let us first briefly consider what “polemic” is.

The rules of polemic are roughly these: It is done in writing. It is always against another named individual’s writing. It is direct and frank and it shows little regard for bourgeois squeamishness; on the other hand, it pays the utmost respect to the meaning of the opponent’s words. Opponents in polemic never misrepresent each other. Everything is permissible, except misrepresentation.

For example, Engels begins the linked text with references to

his opponent Mulberger, who had complained that Engels had been blunt to the point of rudeness. Engels concedes little more than sarcasm:

*“I am not going to quarrel with friend Mulberger about the ‘tone’ of my criticism. When one has been so long in the movement as I have, one develops a fairly thick skin against attacks, and therefore one easily presumes also the existence of the same in others. In order to compensate Mulberger I shall try this time to bring my ‘tone’ into the right relation to the sensitiveness of his epidermis.”*

But later, admitting that he had misrepresented Mulberger on a particular (quite small) point, Engels lambastes himself as “irresponsible”.

*“This time Mulberger is really right. I overlooked the passage in question. It was irresponsible of me to overlook it...”*

After his remarks about “Mulberger”, Engels goes straight into a long paragraph (the second half of page 1, going over to page 2) that contains a summary of theory and practice, vanguard and mass, from the 1840s up until his point of writing, just one year after the fall of the Paris Commune. The paragraph mentions “the necessity of the political action of the proletariat and of the **dictatorship of the proletariat** as the transitional stage to the abolition of classes and with them of the state.”

This is the Communist Manifesto all over again. So, we can ask, why does Engels “go to town” to this extent? Is this not merely “housing” we are talking about? Is not housing something that

everybody needs? Classless, surely? A win-win situation? Motherhood and apple-pie?

Engels says: NO! Engels says: the class struggle is here, and everywhere.

What we can read in Mulberger, through Engels' eyes, is the petty-bourgeois (and full bourgeois) greed for this Housing Question as a means, or a tool, for reproducing petty-bourgeois consciousness, and this is just exactly how the post-1994 South African Government started dealing with the housing question. Yes, there should be lots of houses, it said in effect, but they must be petty-bourgeois-style houses, both in physical type, and in form of ownership.



The argument about housing is an argument about the reproduction of capitalism. It is an argument about the continuation of the ascendancy of bourgeois values over those

of the working-class. For the bourgeoisie, the creation of a dwelling is an opportunity to invest the house with peasant-like values of individuality, and with petty-bourgeois ideas of “entrepreneurship”, and to regulate and control the people according to these values.

Everything that happened in “housing” in South Africa post-1994 is pre-figured in the banal prescriptions of Mulberger that Engels lambastes. Any critique of housing in South Africa will inevitably have to follow the example of Engels if it is to be of any use. Please, comrades, read the first pages and the last paragraphs of this document, even if you cannot read all of it.

As the **Communist Manifesto** says, the history of all hitherto-existing societies has been a history of class struggle. The coming “development” period of South African history will also be a period of class struggle. We may not necessarily win every specific struggle. But what this text of Engels says is: let us never fool ourselves. Win or lose, we are in a class struggle, and there is no neutral ground, least of all on the question of housing and land development.

Pictures: **Shack**, Abahlali BaseMjondolo; **RDP House**, David Goldblatt: “Miriam Mazibuko watering the garden of her new RDP house, Extension 8, Far East Bank, Alexandra Township, Johannesburg, 12 September 2006. It has one room. For lack of space, her four children live with her parents-in-law.”

- The above is to introduce the original reading-text: [The Housing Question, Part Three, Frederick Engels, 1872](#).
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